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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews recent evidence on a new treatment procedure for dating anxieties and inhibitions based on real-life practice dating interactions. The procedure involves randomly pairing opposite-sexed partners (both of whom are volunteers for the treatment program) for a series of practice dates, each with a different partner. Data from five studies are summarized, and point to the effectiveness of the practice dating procedure, compared to control groups and compared to other behavioral treatment procedures. The economy of the procedure for widescale administration with a minumum of professional time suggests that it holds promise in institutional applications such as mental health clinics and counseling centers. (Author)

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TREATMENT STRATEGIES FOR SOCIAL INHIBITION BASED ON REAL-LIFE PRACTICE

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In my paper today, I will be discussing a new approach to the treatment of minimal dating and social isolation based on real-life practice interactions. Most behavioral treatment approaches for social inhibition have emphasized either behavior rehearsal for social skill training or systematic desensitization for anxiety reduction. One feature which these approaches share in common is that the treatment takes place in the office or clinic and is typically conducted by trained therapists. One problem for such approaches has been the generalization of treatment effects from the treatment situation to the target situations in the client's natural environment. While some degree of generalization does occur with behavior rehearsal and desensitization, these procedures often have to be supplemented in clinical practice by other procedures like homework assignments to enhance generalization.

Our thinking led us to develop a treatment program based on the simple idea that as the treatment situation becomes more similar to the target situation, the greater will be the degree of generalization. Obviously, in the extreme case, where the treatment and target situations are identical, then problems with generalization are non-existent. In fact, this has been the approach taken in in vivo desensitization.

It was this line of thinking that led us to the general treatment approach which I will be describing to you today - practice dating. In my paper today, I will be reviewing several recent outcome studies, from our laboratory and others, which have evaluated the effectiveness of this procedure. The original procedure was developed by Andrew Christensen and myself.

While the procedure has varied somewhat from study to study, let me first describe it to you in its basic form. Essentially the procedure

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consists of a series of weekly practice dates, each with a different partner. Both dating partners are volunteers for a treatment program aimed at increasing dating comfort and frequency. The overall procedure consists of an initial orientation meeting with the subjects to explain the details of the program, and assessment given before and after treatment, as well as at a follow-up period. The only intervening treatment consists of a series of practice dates with an opposite-sexed volunteer for the program. In most of the studies, subjects typically have six such practice dates. At the initial orientation meeting, subjects are told that the purpose of these dates is for practice in dating situations, and not to provide them with any ideal partner or precise match. All subjects know that their dating partners are also volunteers for the program. After the assessment period, subjects are sent the name and telephone number of a different partner each week. Their only instruction is that a meeting should occur with the partner before the end of that week. All details of the date - including where to go, how long the date should be, what to talk about, etc, are left entirely to the subjects. Even the decision as to who makes the call to arrange the date is left entirely to the subjects. Each week, each of the partners are sent the name and telephone number of their dating partner for that week. And each week, this procedure is repeated with a different partner. Except for the orientation meeting and the assessment, there is no other contact between the subjects and any therapists or experimental personnel.

This procedure bears some obvious similarites to a computer dating service. However, there are several important differences between our procedure and such services. The goal of the practice dating procedure is stated to the subjects as dating practice rather than helping them find some ideal match through some detailed matching of partners characteristics.

And, related to this point, the matches are almost entirely random in the practice dating procedure with a few rare exceptions. This is in contrast to computer dating services whose stated goals are to find some ideal partner for the participant through a detailed matching of characteristics of the participants.

In the various studies which I will be reviewing, there have been four main classes of assessment procedures which have been used, although not all measures have been used in all of the studies. Let me describe these to you:

1) Self-report: These measures have included social anxiety scales, like the Social Avoidance and Distress Scale developed by Watson and Friend (1968) In addition, it includes self-ratings of social anxiety and social skill, and retrospective reports of dating frequency.

2) Self-monitoring: All of the studies have used some form of self-monitoring where subjects record their date and casual interactions as they occur during a 10 day assessment period.

3) Behavioral: This consists of measures derived from an interaction with an opposite-sexed partner in the laboratory. In most instances, this has been with one of the other volunteers for the program where their first interaction takes place in the laboratory. In other instances, the interaction has been with a confederate in a waiting room or has also involved audiotaped social situations to which the subject responds aloud. Measures derived from these tasks have included latency of verbal responses, number of awkward conversational silences, and pulse rate.

4) Peer Ratings: Peer ratings have derived from two sources in the different studies. In most instances, the peer ratings consist of ratings of the subject's anxiety and skill in the assessment interaction described above. These ratings were done by the subjects' partners as

well as observers of the interaction.

The first study (Christensen and Arkowitz, 1974) was a preliminary one to see whether we could demonstrate any possible treatment effects with the practice dating procedure. In this exploratory study, subjects were 14 male and 14 female undergraduate volunteers who constituted a single experimental group. Subjects were assessed before and after treatment with self-report and self-monitoring measures. Also, the practice dating procedure in this study included a feedback component for all subjects. After each date, subjects filled out a date feedback form which asked for specific feedback to their partners about appearance and behavior on the date. These feedback forms were forwarded to the partner within a few days after the date.

The results of this initial study were quite promising. Subjects showed significant improvement on self-report measures of social anxiety and social skill, and on self-monitoring measures. Of particular interest, subjects showed large and significant increases in dating frequency from baseline to post-treatment assessment. In addition, the program was equally effective for men and women.

In themselves, these findings were quite encouraging. However, we were very interested in the question of the extent to which the increases in date and casual interactions were a result of continued contact with partners met through the program as opposed to interactions with other partners whom the subjects had met on their own. We were able to answer this from the self-monitoring diary that we employed. We found that about 65% of the post-treatment dates and 89% of the post-treatment casual interactions were between the subjects and other partners whom they had <u>not</u> met through the program. Thus, the increases in social interactions and dates primarily reflected contacts with partners they had known before and new partners.

This strongly suggested that any changes which occurred were due to some active behavior change process, beyond simply providing our subjects with partners.

The next study we did (Christensen, Arkowitz, and Anderson, 1975) was a controlled outcome study. In this experiment, we compared practice dating with feedback, as described above, with a group that received practice dating only without the feedback component, and a waiting list control group. Of the 145 volunteers for this program, we selected the 30 men and 30 women who were lowest in dating frequency. The mean dating frequency for our sample was about 1 date per month, with a number of the subjects report zero frequency dating. There were 10 men and 10 women in each of the three groups. Assessment procedures included self-report, self-monitoring, behavioral, and peer-rating measures.

The results of this study clearly demonstrated the consistent superiority of the practice dating groups over the control group on self-report, self-monitoring, and behavioral measures. In this study, there was no effect for the peer rating measures. On measures of post-treatment dating frequency, the control group subjects were averaging 1.2 dates per month, and the combined practice dating groups were averaging 4 dates per month (practice only 3.2 and practice plus feedback 4.8). Once again, the overwhelming majority of the post-treatment dates and casual interactions were with new partners (78% of the dates and 96% of the casual interactions), with the percentages closely paralleling those found in the first experiment. Thus, while we failed as a computer dating service in finding very good matches for our subjects, the program did seem to provide something that allowed the subjects to find new partners for themselves.

Comparisons between the two practice dating groups yielded only one significant difference. On behavioral measures, the practice dating only group did significantly better than did the feedback group. Thus, if anything, feedback seemed to detract rather than add to the practice dating effect. In addition, we followed up our subjects three and fifteen months after the end of treatment. Follow-up consisted of self-report measures of social anxiety and social skill, and retrospective reports of dating frequency. Our follow-up results showed that our subjects remained significantly improved on these measures. And, once again, the program was equally effective for men as for women.

A recent study by Kramer(1975) at the University of Texas compared practice dating, practice dating with cognitive restructuring, behavioral rehearsal, and waiting list control group. The practice dating group received 5 practice dates. In the practice dating with cognitive restructuring group, subjects also received 5 practice dates with other group members. However, they also met for 5 sessions as a group with a therapist. The group treatment was aimed at changing irrational beliefs and self-verbalizations relating to dating based on the approaches of Ellis(1963) and of Meichenbaum(1973). The behavior rehearsal group also had 5 group treatment sessions, primarily involving behavior rehearsal and feedback around problematic situations relating to dating. The behavior rehearsal group did not receive any practice dating.

Assessment included-report, self-monitoring and behavioral measures of social anxiety and social skill. With a few exceptions, the results indicated that the three treatment groups all improved significantly compared to the control group and were not significantly different from one another. One exception involved dating frequency. On this measure

only the practice dating group showed significant improvement.

Another study by Thomander (1975) at Michigan State evaluated a treatment procedure based on practice dating plus group meetings which included discussion and behavior rehearsal. This study provides additional evidence for the effectiveness of practice dating. In addition, this study included three groups which received different numbers of practice dates. The results indicated that, at least for women, improvement was linearly related to the number of practice dates which the subjects had, again pointing to the effectiveness of the specific practice dating procedure.

The four studies which I've briefly reviewed thus far have all focussed on the treatment of minimal dating. In the last study which I will report to you, we sought to extend the general procedure to another important area of social inhibition - shyness in same sex friendship interactions. While sub-assertiveness and minimal dating have been the prime targets in behavioral treatment approaches, inhibitions relating to same sex friendship interactions are at least as significant problems clinically. Friends provide opportunities for information, modeling, correction of misconceptions, opportunities for social comparison, and supportive opportunities to discuss one's personal concerns.

The study which I'll be reporting to you was a dissertation by Stephen Royce (1975) from our laboratory. Subjects were male and female undergraduate volunteers for a program to improve friendship interactions. Assessment consisted of self-report, self-monitoring, behavioral, and peer rating measures. In this study, peer ratings included ratings of the subject's performance by their partners and observers of the assessment interactions as in the earlier studies. However, we also included

a peer rating form which was sent to acquaintances of the subjects before treatment and once again at three month follow-up. The peer rating form called for ratings of the subject on social skill, social anxiety and frequency and range of friendship and dating interactions. Self-monitoring measures also included dates and casual interactions with the opposite sex as an exploratory measure. Even though dating was not the target of treatment, we felt that if the program were successful in effecting changes in friendship interactions, this might also be associated with changes in opposite sex interactions.

In this study, there were two main experimental groups. The first group - practice interactions only - met with five different partners over a five week period and received no other treatment. These weekly dyads were asked to get together twice during each week. Thus, subjects in this group received a total of 10 practice interactions with 5 different same-sexed partners who were also volunteers for the program. In the second treatment group - practice plus feedback and social skill training - we sought to enhance the effects of the practice interaction procedure by adding two components to the basic procedure. Subjects in this group received precisely the same number of practice interactions as the first group. In addition, they had 5 weekly group meetings with a therapist. Part of each group meeting was devoted to face-to-face feedback by the participants in the practice interactions from the previous week. The remainder of each of the group meetings revolved around modeling, behavior rehearsal, feedback, and homework assignments dealing with problematic situations in friendship interactions. We also included a minimal treatment control group who received no practice interactions and no specific social skill training, but received equivalent group contact to the second (practice + feedback and social skill training) group described above. Subjects

in this minimal treatment control group met as a group with a therapist. The group meetings revolved around readings from a manual for enhancing social interaction, and discussion of the information and the subject's concerns in friendship interactions. No behavior rehearsal or other specific social skill training was given to this group. The two remaining control groups were a waiting list control and a no treatment control.

The results of this study were quite striking and consistent. On all of the measures except the behavioral ones derived from the laboratory interaction, the two practice interaction groups showed significant improvements compared to the control groups and were not significantly different from one another. This pattern held for self-report measures, peer rating measures, and self-monitoring measures of frequency and range of friendship interactions. With respect to opposite sex interactions, there were some interesting findings. The two practice interaction groups showed significant increases in their casual interactions with members of the opposite sex compared to the control groups. However, there were no significant changes in dating frequency, Thus far, we've completed a three month follow-up and the post-treatment changes seem to have maintained quite well over this period.

This is the state of research on practice dating thus far. The research has led us to some conclusions and speculations which I would like to discuss. First, within the limits of the samples studied, the practice procedure seems highly effective. Surprisingly, attempts to enhance the effects of real-life practice with other procedures such as feedback, social skill training, and cognitive restructuring have not been successful. The major therapeutic element appears to be the basic

one of real-life practice.

One aspect of the practice interaction procedure deserves mention. This is the economy which the procedure offers in reaching large numbers of individuals at little expense. The basic procedure requires no direct contact between the subject and any therapist or experimental personnel, except for orientation and assessment. In fact, the procedure can be implemented by personnel trained only in clerical and administrative skills. Thus, by contrast to social skill training procedures and systematic desensitization, the practice procedure is highly economical and lends itself quite readily to wide scale administration at counseling centers and mental health clinics. In addition, it is equally effective for both men and women. And, it seems to be highly effective in changing the frequency of dating and friendship interactions with partners other than those whom our subjects met as part of the program.

However, one major limitation of these studies should be noted - the nature of the sample. While we selected the most inhibited subjects from our volunteers, the subjects still appear to be several steps removed from more inhibited clinical populations. For example, the mean pre-treatment dating frequency of the subjects in most of these studies has been one date per month. We feel that there may be important differences between this population who date a little, and a more inhibited population who do not date at all. With more clinically inhibited populations, there may be more of a social skill deficit that may not be remedied by simple practice. Effective treatment for such populations may require more specific social skill training procedures in addition to real-life practice.

We are presently engaged in research evaluating the practice procedure with more inhibited populations. But another limitation concerning the sample is that our subjects have been college students - and the effectiveness of the procedure with other populations still remains to be determined.

As to the question of what accounts for the effectiveness of the practice interaction procedure, we have more speculation than we do data. Some data which relates to this question is derived from ratings of our subjects by their partners over the course of the six practice dates. We found that these ratings reveal a significant decrease in anxiety from the first three to the last three practice dates, but no significant changes in ratings of social skill. This suggests that the main process may involve anxiety reduction rather than specific social skill acquisition. In one sense, the procedure can be viewed as a form of in vivo desensitization involving repeated exposure to a moderately threatening, although interpersonally complex, situation - a practice date. Consistent with this speculation, other studies (Arkowitz, Lichtenstein, McGovern, and Hines, 1975; Glasgow and Arkowitz, 1975) have found that minimal dating college students are characterized by excessive anxiety and avoidance of social situations, and not as much by a social skill deficit. Once in an interaction, low frequency daters seem to handle it well, and their overt behavior does not appear discriminably different from that of the high frequency daters. The main difference seems to be in the avoidance of the low frequency daters. However, if this speculation about anxiety reduction is correct, it would once again suggest caution in applying real-life practice as the exclusive treatment for individuals who may have marked social skill deficits.

Related to the speculations of anxiety reduction, the practice procedure may lead to a change in our subjects perceptions of themselves as shy and to changes in the way their peers and others label them.

As a result of the practice procedure, these labels may change to new labels reflecting increased social comfort, confidence, and activity. These changed perceptions of our subjects by themselves and others may help maintain and perpetuate behavior changes initiated by the series of practice interactions.

However, this is still only speculative. We still need to do further research on the real-life practice procedure to determine the behavior change mechanisms involved and to evaluate the effectiveness of the procedure with other more inhibited populations.

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